

# ***TRILOGY***

**three lost tragedies**

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## **RECONSTRUCTIONS FOR PERFORMANCE OF**

**AESCHYLUS' *MYRMIDONS*  
SOPHOCLES' *TEREUS*  
EURIPIDES' *HYPsipYLE***

**To be played consecutively**

At the City Dionysia in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century each tragedian presented four plays in one day, three tragedies followed by a satyr play. My title – *Trilogy* – intentionally reflects that, ignoring the satyr play. I have also tried to reflect something of the different qualities of the three main tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, in the way a small part of their lost work is reconstructed here.

**THE FIRST PLAY:**

# ***MYRMIDONS***

*based on fragments of the play by  
Aeschylus*

## PARODOS

*Enter ACHILLES, wearing a cloak.*

ACHILLES: ('inwardly') ὦδ' ἐστὶ μύθων τῶν Λιβυστικῶν λόγος  
πληγέντ' ἀτράκτω τοξικῶ τὸν ἀετὸν  
εἰπεῖν ἰδόντα μηχανὴν πτερώματος·  
τάδ' οὐχ ὑπ' ἄλλων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς αὐτῶν πτεροῖς  
ἀλισκόμεσθα... ἀλισκόμεσθα... ἀλισκόμεσθα...

*(He removes his cloak, looks at it strangely)*

So – it is not another that is my undoing... that is my undoing – but my own wing.

*ACHILLES sits on a stool (pre-placed centre) – tense, sulky – then veils his head with the cloak.*

*10 seconds.*

*Enter MYRMIDON 1, resolutely, to face ACHILLES; takes deep breath, as about to speak; holds breath, lost for words; sighs; exits.*

*5 seconds.*

*Enter MYRMIDONS 1 and 2, resolutely, to face ACHILLES; both take deep breath, hold it...*

MYRMIDONS: Look.... *(Pause. They sigh.)*

*Myrmidons exit.*

*5 seconds.*

*Enter MYRMIDONS 1, 2 and 3, resolutely, to face ACHILLES; all take deep breath, hold it...*

MYRMIDONS: We know you're angry.... *(Pause. They sigh.)*

*Myrmidons exit.*

*5 seconds.*

*Enter MYRMIDONS 1, 2, 3 and 4, resolutely, to face ACHILLES; all take deep breath, hold it...*

MYRMIDONS: You've got a reason to be angry.... We know! *(Pause. They sigh.)*

*Myrmidons exit.*

*5 seconds.*

*Enter MYRMIDONS 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, resolutely, to face ACHILLES; all take deep breath, hold it...*

MYRMIDONS: A good reason to be angry.... You're right to be angry... BUT! ...

*Pause*

MYRMIDONS: BUT !!!

**Glorious Achilles look look  
can't you see carnage total  
sheer bloody slaughter  
wreaked on Greeks and you?  
idle useless in your tent  
betray them!**

**Yet you hear (yes yes you hear)  
death-screams war-storm Lord  
Achilles Why Why  
defeat staring us  
Yet you<sup>1</sup> ..... (*inarticulate frustration*)**

*Pause. MYRMIDONS as though 'disbanding'. Then they come together again, repeat the ode from "Glorious" (they give it 'one more try') but with different combinations of voices and different emphases.*

*Pause. MYRMIDONS as though 'disbanding,' as before. Then they come together once again, repeat the ode – once more it is 'the same but different'. This time it ends:*

MYRMIDONS: Yet you

idle useless in your tent  
betray us!

## **EPISODE ONE** (The Embassy<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Fragments from Aeschylus are in bold, even where freely translated.

<sup>2</sup> Loosely based on Book IX of *The Iliad*.

*Enter ODYSSEUS*

ODYSSEUS: (*To the seated, veiled, motionless Achilles*) In Homer, in *The Iliad*, when Odysseus brings news of Agamemnon's most generous reconciliatory offer to Achilles – large amounts of gold, numerous beautiful women, even one of his own daughters (with accompanying estate) – then the great hero, in the true spirit of those heroic times, roasts meat and offers it, with wine, naturally. And then we talk. (*Pause*) Of course, you cannot be bought. For my own part, I would stress the issue of your reputation. To be quite frank, we are on the verge of defeat. Hector's blood lust is up. He fears only you. Fight with us today, men will honour you for saving the Greeks. Fight with us tomorrow, men will scorn you. Yes, you might still kill Hector, but for what? Our ships will have been burned. You understand, only one line of defence remains. Fight tomorrow, fight not at all, men will scorn you for condemning Greeks to foreign graves. (*Pause*)

I think I have the argument. (*Pause*)

Did you say something? Of course not. You do not need to *say* No. You *are* No.

I am, as they say, cunning. It is not so bad. But I would rather say knowing. The strategist must, above all, put himself in the shoes – the sandals – of the other. Of his opponent. What *would* you say, since you do not?

This? “Should I, Achilles, bow down again to Agamemnon? That shameless dog has robbed me once, should I give him another chance – to rob me blind again? When he, in his brainlessness, when he took my prize, my woman, away from me, that lovely woman I had won, *he* condemned you all. Not I. Is this my war? Is it even the Greeks' war? For Helen? For Agamemnon's brother's wife? No, I would spurn his gifts, now, should they outnumber the stars – I have land at home. Now, could I plunder Troy on my own, I would count all its fabulous wealth as nothing, compared to life. To *my* life.

“As they say, ‘it's the only one I've got’.” (*Pause*)

In *The Iliad*, your eloquently uncompromising speech made *us* speechless. For a time. In other words you ‘won’.

By those rules, I'd say this is cheating. I, Odysseus, might admire that – if it weren't for the derogation of manliness.

Veils are for brides.

We know your story, glorious Achilles. We know how Thetis, your mother, told you that you had a choice, either to die young, a hero, in Troy, or to lead an insignificant, but long and comfortable life at home. We know the choice you *made*. I, for one, understand, after ten years, the hour – your death – drawing closer, the idea might occur of changing your mind.

I'm not saying I don't believe in your anger. Just that you are expressing it... unusually. Nursing it, one might say – if it is anger. (*Pause*)

Evidently, it is not always enough to 'have the argument'.

*ACHILLES removes the cloak from his head, rises, places the cloak upon the stool.*

*Taking the role of Phoenix, he then addresses the cloak/stool (i.e. Achilles).*

ACHILLES: (*gently*) Achilles, I have looked upon you as my own son. (*Pause*) Long ago, my mother asked me, begged me, to make love to a slave girl. She, my mother, had seen the look – the desire-scheme – in my father's eye. She wanted me to... pre-empt the situation. I did so. My father realized. He cursed me, that I should never have a son. I left home. Later, I became your tutor. Now I am old. In place of a son, I have you. I do not want you to die. Even so... I have come here with Odysseus to beg you to relent. Why? You are young: everything is personal. But it is not. There is also the...

ODYSSEUS: (*To Achilles/Phoenix, interrupting*) Wait! (*He sits on the stool: as Achilles*) Phoenix, old uncle, *what* Greek army? I, Achilles, see only Agamemnon!

*ODYSSEUS gets up, gives ACHILLES the cloak. ACHILLES sits on the stool, covers his head with the cloak, as before.*

ODYSSEUS: In the shoes of the other, you see. Call it my 'realism'.  
*Exit ODYSSEUS.*

## **'STASIMON'**

*The MYRMIDONS play cards.*

*After a while, one rolls on the floor, pummels the ground with his fists, crying like a baby. This over, he rejoins the game. The others take no notice.*

*After a while, one takes an object (whatever serves) and, in a rage, destroys it utterly. This over, he rejoins the game. The others take no notice.*

*After a while, two start a fight. This becomes increasingly brutal until one kills the other. The victor rejoins the game. Then so does the dead man. The others take no notice. They continue playing cards through the following:*

MYRMIDON 1: (*Out of the blue*) The economics of anger.

*The others look at him.*

MYRMIDON 1: You're angry... and you want to *stay* angry. (*Pause*) You're angry... *but...* you want to stay angry. 'But'. Or... you're angry... *so* you want to stay angry. Hm.

MYRMIDON 2: 'You'?

MYRMIDON 1: One is angry.

MYRMIDON 2: Which one?

MYRMIDON 1: I'm generalizing.

*Pause*

MYRMIDON 3: But why?

MYRMIDON 1: Generalize?

MYRMIDON 3: Want to stay angry?

MYRMIDON 4: Anger...

MYRMIDON 5: Yes?

MYRMIDON 4: is...

MYRMIDON 1: Yes?

MYRMIDON 4: ... wanting to *do* something *with your anger!*

MYRMIDON 5: *Your* anger...

MYRMIDON 2: Yes?

MYRMIDON 5: wants *you* to do something.

MYRMIDON 4: With it.

MYRMIDON 5: For it.

MYRMIDON 1: Your anger needs you.



MYRMIDON 2: More than you need your anger.

*Long pause.*

MYRMIDON 3: Like kill someone.

MYRMIDON 1: Exactly. A quick kill. Over before it's begun. Almost.

MYRMIDON 5: Whereas...

MYRMIDON 1: Exactly.

MYRMIDON 5: *Not* wanting to fight.

MYRMIDON 3: Wanting to *not* fight.

MYRMIDON 2: Goes on and on.

MYRMIDON 4: And on.

MYRMIDON 1: So you have to *stay* angry!

*Pause*

MYRMIDON 1: How?

MYRMIDON 5: Good question.

MYRMIDON 4: By... *not* doing something with it.

MYRMIDON 5: Not doing something for it.

MYRMIDON 3: By *not expressing* it!

MYRMIDON 2: Not healthy, that.

MYRMIDON 1: A good rage, I say.

MYRMIDON 4: Same as a good laugh.

MYRMIDON 2: Better out than in.

MYRMIDON 5: He looks constipated.

*Pause*

MYRMIDON 5: He *is* expressing it.

MYRMIDON 2: He is expressing it?

MYRMIDON 5: By *not* talking...

MYRMIDON 2: ... he *is* expressing it. True.

MYRMIDON 3: In fact, you could say, by *not* expressing it, he....

MYRMIDONS: True. True.

*Pause, awed by the paradox*

MYRMIDON 4: Why are *we* foregrounded like this, anyway? In *The Iliad* we hardly get a look in.

MYRMIDON 1: It's because of the 'two-actor rule'. In those days, that's all they had. Look, here comes the second one.

MYRMIDON 4: Odysseus?

MYRMIDON 1: Not necessarily.

*They stop playing cards – like soldiers unexpectedly interrupted by a senior officer.*

## EPISODE TWO

### PHASE ONE

*Enter ANTILOCHUS*

ANTILOCHUS: News, Achilles.... Antilochus brings you news.... They....

*ACHILLES begins to laugh. His laughter gets bigger. In the end, he removes the cloak from his head. It drops on the floor. He stands.*

ACHILLES: *(still laughing)* **They – *they* – are going to stone me? *(Into his anger)***

**Don't imagine, ever, that I, the son of Peleus, will fall, body broken,  
bloodied, here, on Trojan earth, to *their* stones! For that way I would *save*  
the Trojans, let them sit at ease and win without a battle!**

ANTILOCHUS: Nevertheless, it may happen – and easier then for you to meet  
that healer of all our flesh faults.<sup>3</sup>

MYRMIDONS: They – *they* – are going to stone him? Don't imagine, ever... *(they  
continue, as above, sotto voce under ACHILLES' next speech, pronouns  
changed as appropriate.)*

ACHILLES: **They dream! Shall I leap back into the thick of battle, gripping my  
spear with a hand flaming, still, with rage, out of fear of the Greeks? Why,  
if I have turned the battle– as my comrades in arms are saying – if I have  
caused this great rout from this distance, just by staying out of it, am I not  
all in all to the Greek army? The truth is – nor am I afraid to say it – no  
one, no Greek general or warlord measures up to me.**

**Ha! ... one man... you scattered, struck down... his weapons...**

MYRMIDON: Broken words. This, perhaps...

ACHILLES: **So you are overpowered, you are scattered and struck down, by one  
man? By one man – me – keeping his weapons to himself?**

MYRMIDON: Or this, perhaps...

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<sup>3</sup> Death, presumably.

**ACHILLES: When one man, Cynus charging, had you overpowered, his young arms weaponed, you then scattered and struck down, who was it saved you, pitiful army, from that Trojan onslaught? I!**

*Pause. ACHILLES sits, his posture as before, but no longer veiled.*

MYRMIDON: Silence again, but not by choice, now – a silence now of loss, lost words, words lost in sand, words.

*Pause. They whisper:*

MYRMIDON: It was, as they say, the beginning of the end.

MYRMIDON: In retrospect.

MYRMIDON: It was – a kind of defeat.

MYRMIDON: For?

MYRMIDON: Him.

MYRMIDON: Hubris?

MYRMIDON: Be original!

MYRMIDON: Breaking his silence?

MYRMIDON: In retrospect... it was a step towards Yes.

MYRMIDONS: (*full volume*) The problem with life is / you never have the benefit of hindsight till / it's too late.

*Pause*

ANTILOCHUS: In fact, it's not certain this was Achilles' first speech in the play.

MYRMIDON: So?

ANTILOCHUS: It's not even certain this speech comes from this play.

MYRMIDON: 'This play'?

ANTILOCHUS: The one by Aeschylus.

MYRMIDON: Oh.

MYRMIDON: So?

ANTILOCHUS: You are jumping to conclusions.

MYRMIDONS No, we're not.... The problem with life is / you never have the benefit of hindsight till / it's too late.

## **PHASE TWO**

*Sudden cacophony of battle, brief and abstract.*

*ANTILOCHUS walks round in a tight circle, then....*

ANTILOCHUS: (*alarmed, urgently*) **The carved, golden horse-cock, so laboriously crafted, nailed to the ship's prow! Its paint is melting!**

*Brief shocked pause. Then the following is choreographed, stylised panic, the lines below or parts of them being rhythmically repeated and overlapped as required, including ANTILOCHUS' speech above. This stops abruptly at Phase Three.*

MYRMIDON: We are not looking back.

MYRMIDON: We are here.

MYRMIDON: We are now.

MYRMIDONS: Greek ships are burning!

### **PHASE THREE**

*ANTILOCHUS takes the cloak from the floor. Handling it with reverence, he spreads it in front of ACHILLES on the ground. It is the body of Patroclus. ACHILLES stands.*

ACHILLES: (*a great, broken wail – the word hardly recognizable*) NO!!!

**Antilochus, lament for me, alive, rather than for him, dead. For I have lost everything!**

*After a moment, the action 'stops'. In a wholly focused, sober (but not sombre) way, the actors return to earlier positions. ANTILOCHUS returns the cloak to its previous place.*

*The following is a reprise without choreography and repetitions, and with reduced expression.*

MYRMIDON: We are not looking back.

MYRMIDON: We are here.

MYRMIDON: We are now.

MYRMIDONS: Greek ships are burning!

*Pause*

MYRMIDON: Book 16 of *The Iliad*. Achilles' greatest, truest, closest friend, Patroclus, comes to him, weeping.

MYRMIDON: Why are you weeping, like a little girl? said Achilles.

MYRMIDON: Achilles, said Patroclus, have you no pity for the dying Greeks? If you will still not fight, at least let me.

Give me a company of your Myrmidons. Fresh troops.

Better, lend me your famous armour, that Trojans may mistake me, taking me for you, and flee.

*ACHILLES himself takes the cloak from the floor (it is the armour he has given to Patroclus, now become Patroclus' body). Handling it with reverence, he spreads it on the ground where ANTILOCHUS had put it.*

ACHILLES: *(a great, broken wail – the word hardly recognizable)* YES!!!

*(A sudden cacophony of battle, brief, abstract and deadly.)*

**Antilochus, lament for me, alive, rather than for him, dead. For I have lost everything!**

*The lamentation. The lines enclosed in [ ] should be almost sung, as close to song as possible without this seeming forced – Sprechstimme perhaps with some mixing/echoing of voices. The section should be repeated once to enhance this effect.*

[ACHILLES: *(To Patroclus)* **Ungrateful for my lavished kisses! Your own pure perfect limbs you took for granted!**

MYRMIDON: Mindless, took no regard

ACHILLES: **For the refined companionship of your legs and arms.**

MYRMIDON: Bloodied! Torn!

MYRMIDON: Disfigured friend.

ACHILLES: **Yet not, because I love him, to me repulsive.]**

*ACHILLES takes up the cloak, holds it in front of him (no longer a body, but his armour)*

ACHILLES: **The old Libyan tale, what it says is here. The eagle, shot by an arrow, saw its feathered shaft and said: “So – it is not another that is my undoing, but my own wing.”**

*(Pause. He puts on the cloak.)*

**Weapons! Bring me weapons! My weapons! I need weapons! WEAPONS!!**

*(An almost inarticulate scream as ACHILLES exits)* **WEAPONS!!!**

*ANTILOCHUS follows ACHILLES out.*

*The MYRMIDONS realize the situation. Through the sound system, we hear Achilles' voice.*

SOUND SYSTEM: ὦδ' ἐστὶ μύθων τῶν Λιβυστικῶν λόγος

πληγέντ' ἀτράκτω τοξικῶ τὸν ἀετὸν  
εἰπεῖν ἰδόντα μηχανὴν πτερώματος·  
τάδ' οὐχ ὑπ' ἄλλων, ἀλλὰ τοῖς αὐτῶν πτεροῖς  
ἀλίσκομεσθα.

*During this, overlapping:*

MYRMIDON: This is it.

MYRMIDON: This is really it!

MYRMIDON: What we've been waiting for.

MYRMIDONS: WE'RE ON!!!

*They file out. As he exits, the last one left in view calls off to the others:*

MYRMIDON: What was that about an eagle?

*Fade out*

**END**

**THE SECOND PLAY:**

***TEREUS***

**after Sophocles**

1.

*Enter three actors (2f, 1m). As slowly as possible, they transform themselves into birds. (There must be no external imitation or 'demonstrating' in this. The transformation comes from within.)*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE (*m, through sound system*): No 'phoning in' please. No demonstrating. You don't have wings, but you do have eyes. That's where the life is focused. In the eyes.

*As birds, they exit separately, going in different directions.*

*Blackout*

2.

*Enter one actor (f) – PHILOMELA. She stands centre.*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Close your eyes, to help you concentrate on the smallest muscle movement. (*Pause*) Top hatters in hot bottomless pits.

PHILOMELA: Top hatters in hot bottomless pits.

VOICE: Rapacious rhapsodists dress desperately.

PHILOMELA: Rapacious rhapsodists dress desperately.

VOICE: Now with the stone. Focus on the movements of your tongue. The tongue. Nothing else.

PHILOMELA: Eyes still closed?

VOICE: Yes.

*PHILOMELA grips a small stone between her teeth, forcing her to speak without up-down jaw movement.*

PHILOMELA: Top hatters in hot bottomless pits. (*Pause*) Rapacious rhapsodists dress desperately.

VOICE: Next. Hold on to your tongue, with your fingers. Hold it out from your mouth, as far out as you can. Keep hold of it.

PHILOMELA: (*normal speech*) Eyes still closed?

VOICE: No. (*Brief pause*) No! Look at me. You're trying to say something to someone.

*PHILOMELA holds her tongue as she speaks. She looks into the audience.*

PHILOMELA: Top hatters in hot bottomless pits. (*Pause*) Rapacious rhapsodists dress desperately.



VOICE: Now just the vowels. Vowels are pure breath, all emotion, no meaning. This time bite your tongue, like you did the stone, hold it that way – sound the vowels long, find out which are still yours.

PHILOMELA: (*her tongue held between her teeth, forcing as much sound as possible*) Ah... ay... ee... oh... eu.

VOICE: Now – who do you want to speak to? Of the two?

PHILOMELA: (*normal speech*) My sister.

VOICE: Then do so. Wait one moment. Sound!

*The song of a nightingale is heard through the sound system. The contrast with PHILOMELA's restricted speech, as she holds her tongue between her teeth, should seem grotesque. This should feed back into her own consciousness and so into the emotion she projects.*

PHILOMELA: I – he – why – like I – betrayed you – WHY – I didn't do – he – unless – by being – but nothing – to provoke – but dirty – dirty – d – (*Pause. Then normal speech*). I haven't just lost a voice. I've lost the words.

VOICE: Good.

*Blackout (and silence)*

### 3.

*Enter one actor (f) – PROKNE. She fetches onions, tomatoes, bunches of herbs, etc. (These must be real.) She chops them, then puts them into a large cooking pot. The image is one of domestic normality. After a while....*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Now pick up the baby.

*PROKNE takes a child's baby doll. It is naked.*

VOICE: Now fondle it, dandle it, sing to it, play with it.

PROKNE: Isn't it dead?

VOICE: Not to you.

*PROKNE does as instructed. She should make the audience believe that it's not a doll after all, but a real baby. After a while....*

VOICE: Now!

*Holding the doll very differently, by one of its arms, PROKNE lays it on the chopping board. She takes a knife and cuts off one of its legs. She starts laughing. For a time she can't stop laughing.*

VOICE: Laughter isn't necessarily wrong. *(Pause)* Do it again. From the dandling.

PROKNE: I need a new doll.

VOICE: No.

PROKNE: I can't do it with this one.

VOICE: You can.

*PROKNE does as instructed. Again she should make the audience believe that it's not a doll after all, but a real baby. After a while....*

VOICE: Sound!

*The song of a nightingale is heard through the sound system.*

VOICE: Now!

*Holding the doll very differently, by one of its arms, PROKNE lays it on the chopping board. She takes a knife and cuts off one of its arms. This time she continues cutting up the doll and putting the pieces in the pot. As she does so, she starts sobbing, becoming convulsed by a strange inarticulate mourning 'song,' a kind of introverted wailing, perfectly blending with the song of the nightingale. After a while....*

VOICE: Thank you.

*Exit PROKNE (and silence)*

VOICE: Sophocles was right. *(Pause)* She is the nightingale.

*Blackout*

*(Note: props used in this scene can be left on through to, but not during, scene 14.)*

#### 4.

*Enter one actor (m) – TEREUS.*

TEREUS: I would rather have seduced her.... I imagined seducing her.... I would like to have taken time – breasts, armpits, ankles, belly, calves, fingers, each knuckle, their tips in my mouth.... Her willing surrender – into self-abandonment – through that her *presence*, wholly there with me – her amazed eternally grateful discovery of her own deepest rooted desperate lust... would have pleased me more.

Only in some other world!

The truth is, if she had not been like that... if she had not taken so completely for granted that *impossibility* – I married to her sister – I would, naturally, still

have imagined it, but not to the tipping point, not of... forcing some approximation... into *this* world.

God, what a cliché! ‘Purity’! Virgin through and through, the authentic article, not just an unused cunt! That’s what did it, tipped it, made the dream insufferably *not enough!* Is *that* what I’m saying?

Rape... is something other. I discovered. Of course, I had raped before. Just women, girls too, for the momentary fizz; not even the power-surge, after the first time. Bodies. But with her I felt no soldier. With Philomela I would make time run backwards, wanted a... return, to rediscover what I had not known. But what I got, ‘the message,’ instant feedback, the first touch, in her shocked shudder into somewhere else, told me – *she didn’t have what I wanted!* So I raped her for that! Instead! “You – fucking – whore!” “You – fucking – whore!”

*Pause*

Why did I cut her tongue out? I think... what I felt was... all that energy, all that fierceness, shaking her hot body, but *after*, as she denounced me, as she promised to go on and on denouncing me, speech seeming to flow up through her new snake’s spine, from fire-deep in her guts... I thought, felt, *where was THAT YOU when I was in you?*

I had to punish her.

DIRECTOR’S VOICE: You make me sick.

TEREUS: I’m trying to be honest.

VOICE: No. It’s all words, just words, too many words. You’re a barbarian. Ba ba ba ba ba ba ba... You cut out her tongue because she made you experience your own inarticulacy. You – Tereus – could not have *said* any of this, because – if you could, you could not have *done* it. So – can it still be true?

*Blackout*

## 5.

*The three actors stand centre stage looking at the audience. (In what follows, it doesn’t matter which character speaks which line.)*

ACTOR: We want to discuss something.

DIRECTOR’S VOICE: Go ahead.

ACTOR: We don’t understand where we’re going.

VOICE: Is that a problem?

ACTOR: Yes.

VOICE: Why?

ACTOR: We're supposed to be reconstructing Sophocles' play. But you haven't given us any of the text yet. You even told us not to look it up.

VOICE: Very little text survives. A few scraps. Total, about fifty lines. Hence you can't do this play by *starting* from the text. You have to *end* with the text. So we start from the story.

ACTOR: But the parts of the story we've been working on – the rape, Philomela's tongue being cut out, Prokne killing and cooking her own son, wouldn't these all be left offstage in a Greek tragedy?

VOICE: I should have made it clearer. We're exploring these scenes *in rehearsal*. They're not *in the show*.

*Blackout*

## 6.

*PROKNE alone*

PROKNE: Where is the chorus?

*No response*

PROKNE: There is always – has to be – a chorus!

*No response*

PROKNE: I have to have someone to talk to.... Before....

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Before?

PROKNE: Philomela comes.

*Pause*

PROKNE : Women. Other women.

PROKNE (*speaking as VOICE*): You have a husband.

PROKNE: It's Greek tragedy! (*Pause*) Anyway, he's away. (*Pause*) I'm alone here.

PROKNE (*speaking as VOICE*): A husband is a husband.

PROKNE: I'll invent a chorus! An imaginary friend.

*Pause*

VOICE: You are ready for your first line. **I envy many things in your life, but above all that you have no experience of a foreign land.**<sup>4</sup>

PROKNE: I must be very unhappy.

VOICE: It is probably spoken to the chorus who must therefore be local, Thracians, very probably women, since men would have been much more likely to travel abroad.

*Enter the CHORUS of three Thracian women*

PROKNE: I envy many things in your life, but above all that you have no experience of a foreign land.

CHORUS: Yak vabee ba. Ba radic chulk. Troyshi flandic baba.

*PROKNE doesn't know how to respond. Laugh perhaps?*

*Blackout*

7.

*PHILOMELA alone, on her knees, drawing.*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: How old are you?

PHILOMELA: Six. Seven.

VOICE: Why can't you talk?

PHILOMELA: I can talk.

VOICE: But you can't say it?

*PHILOMELA is silent.*

VOICE: Why not?

PHILOMELA: Don't know.

VOICE: So you're drawing it?

*PHILOMELA nods. She shows the drawing.*

VOICE: The little girl, is it you?

*Silence*

VOICE: You're sitting on a man's knee. He's very, very big. He's looking up at the sky, isn't he? His mouth is wide open. His left hand, is it inside your pretty dress?

*Silence*

VOICE: What's in his right hand?

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<sup>4</sup> The first appearance (before Scene 14) of any fragment of Sophocles' *Tereus* is in bold.

*Silence*

VOICE: What's in his right hand?

*PHILOMELA turns on him angrily*

PHILOMELA: Stop it! Stop it! I think you're really enjoying this! What right have you got? How can you possibly know what you might be stirring up?

VOICE: I'm sorry.

*Pause*

PHILOMELA: As a matter of fact nothing like that ever happened.

VOICE: I'm still sorry.

PHILOMELA: I'm not six. More like sixteen. I don't draw it because... because I think saying it would somehow make *me* seem to blame, a narrative, first this then that, *that* because of this... of me... whereas drawing it....

I *weave* the image of what he did to me because I have no fucking tongue!

VOICE: You're sure it's an image, pictures? Ovid's Philomela weaves letters.

PHILOMELA: If I could write, I'd write, wouldn't I?

VOICE: Then I think the question *was* worth asking, how would you feel while you weave those images? While you 'speak' with what the play calls **the shuttle's voice**?

How would you feel 'giving evidence'?

*Blackout*

**8.**

*TEREUS alone*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: We shall assume that the play begins with your arrival back in Thrace. (*Brief pause*) What have you done with Philomela?

TEREUS: I have raped her and...

VOICE: Oh, dear. A guilty conscience! I did not ask, what have you done *to* her, but what have you done *with* her.

TEREUS: Sorry.

VOICE: But now you have a guilty conscience about having had a guilty conscience. Can't you be pure *id*? I repeat, what have you, as pure *id*, done with Philomela?

TEREUS: *Not* killed her.

VOICE: Good. That would have been much too rational. Well?

TEREUS: Can we run through the options?

VOICE: You simply leave her where you raped her. You imprison her somewhere, as in Ovid. Or you bring her back to your palace – and your wife. In the latter case, either you say, This is Philomela – she has, unfortunately, lost her tongue (improvise!), or you secrete her in the servants' quarters, saying, Alas, your poor dear sister died of a fever on the sea.

TEREUS: If I...

VOICE: No, no, no, no, no! No calculation. No risk assessment. Pure id. Id alone. Id rules OK.... Risks – *what* risks?

*Pause*

VOICE: But you are thinking. I see it. You must leap. A leap of anticipation that is simultaneously a leap of joy! (*Pause*)

Very well, we shall work backwards. This is what, on your return home, you will say to your wife: **Prokne, obviously these things are painful. But, as mortals, we have to put up with what the gods send us.**<sup>5</sup> Say it.

*Pause*

TEREUS: Prokne, obviously these things are painful. But, as mortals, we have to put up with what the gods send us. (*Pause*) It feels... Shakespearean. That villainous.

VOICE: Ah. So now you know.

TEREUS: Yes.

VOICE: Then what do you do with her?

TEREUS: I maximise – I perfect – hypocrisy.

VOICE: Excellent! Listen to these lines from Ovid. He is describing Tereus'

behaviour *after* having cut out Philomela's tongue:

“Yet, after this so damn'd, and black a deed,  
Fame (which I scarce can credit) has agreed,  
That on her rifled charms, still void of shame,  
He frequently indulg'd his lustful flame.”<sup>6</sup>

It was simply a question of the best way to maintain an asset.

*Blackout*

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<sup>5</sup> The attribution of this line to Tereus, as tentatively suggested by Fitzpatrick and Sommerstein, is of course uncertain.

<sup>6</sup> Translation by Dryden, Garth et al.

9.

*The three actors, relaxing (stretches, water, whatever works here).*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: I have told you that some fifty lines of the play remain. Even so, we cannot use them all. These fifty or so lines come in seventeen different fragments. We cannot be certain of the dramatic context of any fragment. Four fragments are from choral odes, so they throw no light on the plot. A further four consist of only one or two words each.<sup>7</sup>

Do you now see 'where we are going'?

*Into the dark.*

But there is one other line I intend to include. It is from a play also called *Tereus*, also surviving only in a few fragments, by a Roman playwright, Accius. It is possible that Accius' play is a kind of translation, or close adaptation, of the play by Sophocles. Possible, but I'm not claiming that as my justification. The line is its own justification. I include it because it frightens me.

*Alia hic sanctitudo est, aliud nomen et numen Iouis.*

"Here sanctity is... *other*, Jove's name and will... *other*."

The more obvious translation is "different," not "other".<sup>8</sup> I don't like "other". But I like it more than "different". Naturally I rule out the phrase "something else" as a trivialization.

But whose line is it?

*Here* sanctity.... Thrace, of course. Not Athens. *Not-Athens*, if you catch that sense. The dark side of the moon. But it is not a place. At least, not geographically. Not culturally. Not even mythologically. *Here* – is the 'place' where *you too* can rape and mutilate, the place where *you too* can kill your own child, cook it, serve it to your husband. A place *within*, deep – for most, undiscovered.

In one sense it is everybody's line, for the unthinkable opportunity. But in this play? Who *claims* it?

*Blackout*

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<sup>7</sup> Sommerstein et al, 149.

<sup>8</sup> R.J.Boyle translates: "Here sanctity is different, Jove's name and will different." It's hard to see how that could be bettered.



10.

*TEREUS alone*

TEREUS: I'll show you.

*He mimes great hunger. Then he notices a fly, hunts it, catches and devours it with huge relish. Hunger again. Worse. Nothing to eat anywhere, except... himself! He considers it, begins with the fingers, moves on to the hands, the whole forearm....*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: The famous lazzo of Arlecchino's hunger. Why ?

TEREUS: I couldn't see any Method-way of getting what we want, it's *too much*.

That's exactly the phrase. TOO MUCH. It seemed so ironic, there's no way to act this 'from within,' but somehow I've got to reach down into my own entrails, feel *their* revulsion and revolt. So I thought, start from the opposite. The idea was, move from Arlecchino's hunger on to pure Gluttony. I was going to devour the stage, the theatre, everything. God, I'd really steal the show in *Faustus*. TOO MUCH TOO MUCH, that paradox! But suddenly I got an image, perfect, absolutely right, I saw myself desperate to throw up – hunger's exact opposite – but completely unable to.... Completely unable to... *disgorge*. I saw myself sticking *my whole arm down my throat* to drag up what I wanted out from my guts.

Of course, I would never try to show it. But I can *want* it.

*Blackout*

11.

*PHILOMELA alone*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: A very simple question. Let's assume that if you had not attacked him verbally, if you had not denounced him, he would not have cut out your tongue. Then... maybe... the rest would be different too. Now, if you could go back in time, to that precise moment, just now 'deflowered,' what would you do? Denounce him – or... 'hold your tongue'?

PHILOMELA: What are you saying? I 'asked for it'? Not the rape – (*she bites her tongue between her teeth, as in 2*) I asked for *this*? (*Normal speech*) Variations on a theme.

VOICE: Not at all. I am interested in... accountancy. The balancing of books. I am asking, which would you rather have, a tongue, or the satisfaction of hitting back?

PHILOMELA: (*ironic*) Hitting?

VOICE: Spitting, then. Spitting words. Yes... that's it. (*Pause*) Imagine him standing there in front of you, the look on his face, the slight twisted smile that says 'It was *your own* fault if *you* didn't enjoy it too'. Then spit – savagely, murderously – in his face.

*PHILOMELA spits*

VOICE: 'How was it for you?'

PHILOMELA: (*a little laugh*) Bastard! Pathetic, actually.

VOICE: Yes, spitting is weak – is weakness. Symbolic shitting on, but the bowels aren't in it. It demonstrates contempt, it does not *ex-press* it. For a moment, the receiver – the 'spitee' we can call him – feels stung. But only for a moment, the merest, slightest moment. A sting *penetrates*, if only the skin. Spittle is superficial. One wipes it off. Humiliation translates as inconvenience. (*Pause*) But not if you spit words. Now spit words.

*PHILOMELA collects herself, prepares to improvise the scene with an imaginary Tereus. Pause.*

PHILOMELA: Nothing comes.

VOICE: I'll prompt. It doesn't matter if the words at first seem inadequate. Just spit them.... Brownshirt!

*PHILOMELA laughs.*

VOICE: Spit it!

PHILOMELA: (*as instructed*) Brownshirt! Brownshirt!

VOICE: Flunkey! Toy monkey!

PHILOMELA: You flunkey! You pathetic little toy monkey!

VOICE: Worm!

PHILOMELA: I've seen worms with bigger pricks!

VOICE: Dumpty Dumpty Dump.

PHILOMELA: You sad little fucking-machine, banging away no joy in that shrivelled soul a ninety-nine year crippled hag wouldn't bother with thank you.

VOICE: He tells you to shut up.

PHILOMELA: Oh, yes? I'll tell you something, there *are* no good little girls! We've been having you on. Look. (*She sucks her thumb sulkily, a caricature little girl.*)  
But *I* choose when I act that, understand!

VOICE: Spit the words!

PHILOMELA: I'll tell you something else there are no men! Myth man! Super man!  
Hi there, I'm cat woman. But *I am!* Super dumb dick! Supremo dick head! Did you fly, with me? Then why don't you jump off that cliff? Oh, but I'm forgetting, something weighs you down! *You* think it's that joyless battering ram soldier don't you but it isn't it's your stupidity!

VOICE: Get under his skin! / (*/ indicates following line overlaps this one*)

PHILOMELA: Stupidity so fat I felt the death in you! Rot in your breath! Vomit-stench inside your eyes!

VOICE: Get inside him! /

PHILOMELA: Lumbering brute mechanical stupidity only death explains it something dead! A stiff animated by a hard-on as in cartoon, pumped up by not blood internal decomposition do you always come by farting? /

VOICE: Now you cannot hear his growling threats. /

PHILOMELA: Dead! Decaying! Dust already. Why then such cowardice? /

VOICE: You penetrate – *truth*, him. /

PHILOMELA: Yes! Fear of life, in you! You are not even here! Nothing here!

Fucking me, a vacuum, where were you? A corpse lay on me, desperate to fuck its own flailing terror of being born into a whipped dog. /

VOICE: Just as he could not then hear your whimpering.

PHILOMELA: Poor Prokne, in the grave! She's in the grave with you! You are the grave sucking at life at me! Sucking not just dry, you shit deserts! Parasitic paralytic self-lickspittle sewerself! The inside out of life the negative a minus sum a curse a cancer crab outside its shell... /

VOICE: Rape his sick soul! /

PHILOMELA: ... a shameless shapeless cringe of god-abandoned soul-puss an abuse of breath a bricked-up door a... (*suddenly drained, pause*) I see what you meant by "accountancy"... And something else... I stopped, but there's, there seems, an *endless supply* of words.

*Blackout*

12.

*PROKNE alone*

DIRECTOR'S VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Emptiness.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: The darkness of a cave.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Between the stars. Of course, I know there is.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Gott ist tod.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Silence... eternally.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Losing your memory. Yes – losing yourself.

VOICE: Nothing.

PROKNE: Not caring... when someone dies.

VOICE: Not caring when someone you love dies.

PROKNE: That doesn't make sense.

VOICE: It must! It can! It can if *it makes no difference*. (Pause) One more. Nothing.

PROKNE: My marriage.

VOICE: You could put that more precisely. Nothing.

PROKNE: My husband?

VOICE: Wrong! Nothing.

*Pause*

PROKNE: Of course. Losing my virginity!

*Pause*

VOICE: Now, what to you is *not nothing*?

PROKNE: Children. Otherwise...

VOICE: Naturally. And?

PROKNE: Everything! There's too much. I can't...

VOICE: All right. A question then. What, to you, are women, your own sex: a lack, a gap, a deficit – or a fullness, a here-ness and now-ness of being?

PROKNE: Both. Yes, both.

VOICE: And *you* said, not caring when someone you love dies ‘doesn’t make sense’!

*Blackout*

### 13. (‘Teaching’ the chorus)

*All actors and CHORUS on*

DIRECTOR’S VOICE: One can say: we know the story... and, or but... we do not know the story. We have the bones. But the ‘muscular ligature’? On top of that, while we can infer what, in the story, was almost certainly *not* shown on stage, that, unfortunately, does not tell us what was shown. Tell them.

TEREUS: Pandion, ruler of Athens, gave his eldest daughter, Prokne, in marriage to Tereus, king of Thrace. Prokne then gave birth to a son, Itys. But she was lonely in her new home, so she asked her husband, Tereus, to go to Athens to bring her young sister, Philomela, to Thrace to visit her.

PHILOMELA: Pandion entrusted his one remaining child, Philomela, into the care of her brother-in-law, Tereus. But somewhere on the journey Tereus raped her. He then cut out her tongue, to prevent her denouncing him. But Philomela revealed the truth to her sister Prokne by means of weaving.

PROKNE: In revenge, Prokne killed her son, Itys, Tereus’ son, cooked his body and fed it to her husband. On learning the truth, Tereus went in pursuit of the fleeing sisters. But Zeus changed all three into birds.

VOICE: I would rather say: (*slow, deliberate*) they chase themselves into birds.

TEREUS: Tereus, a hoopoe.

PHILOMELA: Philomela, a swallow.

PROKNE : Prokne, a nightingale.

*Pause*

CHORUS: Wasn’t it Philomela who becomes the nightingale?

VOICE: The Romans changed it. Their version has filtered down. They must have felt a need to compensate Philomela, as though something in Sophocles was *too tragic*. By the way, the small red mark on a swallow’s breast, that is the ‘proof’ that Philomela participated in the murder – or at least in the butchery.

Now, your role, as chorus, is to be out of your depth, to hide behind platitudes. And to remain human.

*Blackout (props if left on from 3 cleared now).*

14.

[The text that follows comprises most but not quite all of the existing fragments of Sophocles' *Tereus* in a plausible sequence.<sup>9</sup> Only a bare minimum of stage directions is added. It is for performers/director to find how to fill out this text – but NOT with any additional words (but see note 10) – so that it ‘pulls in’ and seems to contain all that the audience has seen/heard in the preceding ‘rehearsal’ scenes.]

*Enter TEREUS*

TEREUS: O Sun, light most revered by the horse-loving Thracians.<sup>10</sup>

*Exit TEREUS*

*Enter PROKNE and CHORUS*

PROKNE: I envy many things in your life, but above all that you have no experience of a foreign land.

*Enter TEREUS*

TEREUS: Prokne, obviously these things are painful. But, as mortals, we have to put up with what the gods send us.<sup>11</sup>

*Exit TEREUS*

PROKNE: But now – on my own – I am nothing. Yet I have often regarded all womankind in this way. We are nothing. As little girls in our father's house, we live, I believe, the happiest possible human lives – for short-sightedness always raises children in happiness, for happiness. But when we reach awareness, when we ‘ripen,’ we are shoved out, sold, away from parents, from gods of the hearth, some to foreign men, some to barbarians, some into joyless homes, some into houses of abuse. And this, after a single night has yoked us, we are to approve and consider ‘the good’.

*Exit PROKNE*

CHORUS: All one tribe, people  
One day begot us one father one mother  
Not

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<sup>9</sup> As suggested by Fitzpatrick and Sommerstein.

<sup>10</sup> (Fitzpatrick's and Sommerstein's translation, not mine; I can't see a better alternative for performance.) This is Tereus' arrival back in Thrace. He would of course have said more. The single word ‘I...’ could be added here, as though *this Tereus* cannot say more.

<sup>11</sup> Assume Tereus has just told Prokne of the ‘death’ of Philomela.

one born above  
another below –  
But from nature to nurture  
ill fate fingers some            some  
strike it rich            some  
a slave's bonds teach  
necessity

*Enter first PROKNE then PHILOMELA. PHILOMELA shows PROKNE the peplos.*

PROKNE: The shuttle's voice.

PROKNE: Here sanctity is *other*, Jove's name and will *other*.<sup>12</sup>

*Exit PROKNE and PHILOMELA*

CHORUS:    What can a person do  
              but live for the day  
              make the most  
              of pleasure's openings  
BLIND  
              he is stumbling  
              into tomorrow

              For the life of a man  
              far-scheming ruin  
              wrecks  
              in any season.

*Enter TEREUS, retching. (Irresistible suggestion: the burden of his gullet and guts stops him speaking!)*

*Enter PROKNE and PHILOMELA.*

PROKNE: Money-grubbing barbarians!

*TEREUS, still trying to throw up, chases PROKNE and PHILOMELA off.*

CHORUS:    [Now

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<sup>12</sup> Presumably Prokne conceives her revenge between these two lines. (It has been suggested – by Dobrov – that the sisters carry out their revenge dressed as maenads. This would not 'read' in the same way for a modern audience; nonetheless some onstage costume change at this point might be effective.)

after Sophocles  
long after Sophocles  
no god appears  
*no voice of a god*  
heard  
proclaiming]<sup>13</sup>

He was a fool.  
They too were fools, the more so.  
For mortals who, in rage against wrong, apply a cure  
worse than the disease  
are doctors without understanding.

*Enter TEREUS. He transforms himself into a bird, as in the first scene. During this...*

TEREUS: Him, the hoopoe, who is a spectator of its own sufferings, Zeus<sup>14</sup> has revealed as a bird of the rocks, bold in its panoply of varied colours.<sup>15</sup> But he will always hate these regions and will shun them, making his home far away in deserted forests and mountains.

*Exit TEREUS, a bird.*

*Enter PHILOMELA. She transforms herself into a swallow in complete silence.*

*Exit PHILOMELA, a bird.*

*Enter PROKNE. She transforms herself into a bird. Through this, we hear the song of the nightingale.*

*Exit PROKNE, a bird.*

*The nightingale's song continues through...*

CHORUS: Human nature must think human thoughts, knowing that there is no decider of the things of the future, except Zeus.

*... and after.*

**END**

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<sup>13</sup> These are the only lines added to the remains of Sophocles' text. It is commonly supposed that the following words were spoken by a god, identity unknown.

<sup>14</sup> 'He' in the original, probably referring to Zeus. Of course the metamorphosis would have been reported, not represented, in Sophocles. The speech would have been a messenger's or a god's.

<sup>15</sup> Five lines omitted (as dramatically irrelevant and ornithologically wacky).



**THE THIRD PLAY:**

**Euripides'**

***HYPsipyle***

(‘complete with cuts’)

HYPSIPYLE

AMPHIARAUS

THOAS

EUNEOS

NARRATOR

CHORUS OF LOCAL (NEMEAN) WOMEN

EURYDICE

PERCUSSIONIST (visible onstage throughout)

Note: only minimal (essential) percussion points have been indicated in the text.

## Scene One (*Anagnorisis*)

*Slowly, with great joy, HYPsipyle embraces her sons, THOAS and EUNEOS.*

*AMPHIARAUS looks on.*

HYPsipyle: My sons, my sons, we have been driven this way, that way, first towards fear, then towards joy.<sup>16</sup> Joy now! After so much time.

AMPHIARAUS: (*To Hypsipyle*) Your service to me has been repaid. I asked you for help. Freely you gave it. Now I have reunited you with your twin sons. Farewell. (*A drum beat, military*) We, as we set out to do, must continue our march against Thebes. (*Exit*)

HYPsipyle: Good powers go with you, your true desert, stranger!

THOAS: Yes, good powers go with you! But you, poor mother – some god wished misery on you.

HYPsipyle: Aiai, the long exile I endured! Driven from Lemnos because I would not sever my father's head!

THOAS: You were told to kill your father?

HYPsipyle: Those evil days! Like gorgons, they slaughtered their husbands in their sleep!

EUNEOS: But how did you escape?

HYPsipyle: I went where the sea swell sounds, to the wave-drumming shore, there among lonely birds.

THOAS: Then how did you come here?

HYPsipyle: Sailors came. And I became a slave, sea-freighted here, mere trafficked goods.

EUNEOS: Ah, how cruel your –

HYPsipyle: No sorrow now for what has turned out well! Tell me, how were you raised, who took care of you?

THOAS: Jason, our father, took us aboard the Argo to Colchis.

HYPsipyle: Babies. You were hardly weaned.

EUNEOS: Then when he died –

HYPsipyle: Aiaiai, your story brings tears to my eyes.

THOAS: Orpheus took us with him to Thrace.

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<sup>16</sup> Fragments from *Hypsipyle* are not in bold. There are many more of them than in the cases of the previous two plays and, more importantly, so many of them are lacunose that any attempt to distinguish them typographically would be confusing or distracting.

EUNEOS: There, he taught me music.

THOAS: Me, the use of weapons.

HYPSIPYLE: And you returned, somehow, to Lemnos, crossing the Aegean?

EUNEUS: Thoas, your father, took us there.

HYPSIPYLE: Then he is safe?

THOAS: Yes. Thanks to the cunning of Dionysos.

CHORUS: (*still off; a whisper, not quite unison, to fill the auditorium*) Dionysos.

NARRATOR: That's what they call a happy ending! A mother, Hypsipyle, reunited with her long lost sons! Not only that, she has just been freed from slavery, so the three of them can return to their home island, Lemnos, together: a Happy Family.

But there's a problem. It's not a problem for *them* (for them, there doesn't seem a cloud in the sky); it's a problem for *us* (call us the 'story tellers'). We don't exactly know how we got here. I mean – we don't exactly know how this happy ending came about. In other words, we're not entirely sure what happens in the story we've come here to tell you.

But – we do have a 'show'.

So let's back up a bit. Earlier that same day.... It might have been the day before. Hmm.... Anyway, this is Euripides. He always starts with a Prologue.

## **Prologue**

HYPSIPYLE: Dionysos, my father's father, with thyrsus and fawnskin, dance-leaping in torch-flame-light across Parnassus with the Delphic virgins... Ariadne... his four sons... each an island... Lemnos... and I... exiled... the yoke... Jason... by the Clashing Rocks....

NARRATOR: In fact, there's not much left of the Prologue.

*HYSIPYLE goes into the palace where (still visible) she picks up the baby.*

NARRATOR: But what it said is easily guessed... or 'reconstructed'. After introducing herself as Dionysos' granddaughter, Hypsipyle would have told the well-known story of the Lemnian women. OK, well-known *then*. Their husbands wouldn't touch them, complaining that they smelled too bad. This wasn't such a problem for the men, who could call on the services of foreign

slave women instead. So, understandably enough, the women of the island conspired to slaughter every male inhabitant. But our heroine, Hypsipyle, chose to save her father, Thoas, the island's king, setting him adrift in a boat with neither oar nor sail. A little later Jason and the Argonauts landed in Lemnos, seeking water and... let's call it refreshment. So the Lemnian women took this golden opportunity to repopulate the island. Presumably they didn't smell so bad by then, or the Argonauts – sailors – weren't so fussy. Hypsipyle, the daughter of a king, claimed Jason as her lover. Nine months later, she bore him twins (you've met them).

Later, the Argo sailed on and Jason took his sons away with him. Soon after that, Hypsipyle's treachery was discovered. She managed to escape the island, as you've already heard her tell her boys, but only at the cost of being sold into slavery. And that's her situation – her 'fate' if you like – right now: she's the slave of King Lycurgus of Nemea and his wife Eurydice. Lycurgus, for your information, is keeper of the temple and sanctuary of Zeus here.

*This is Nemea.*

Hypsipyle is charged with the duty of caring for their baby son, Opheltes.

*Enter THOAS and EUNEOS. They knock at the palace gate.*

THOAS: Look, up there. See the painted reliefs on the pediment?

HYPSIPYLE: (*inside, to the baby; she's been talking to him inaudibly; as she gets up it becomes audible*) ... some toys, that'll settle you and stop your crying.

(*Answering*) Young gentlemen, you knocked at the door? Oh, whoever the woman who bore you, she is blessed! What is it you want from this house?

THOAS: We need shelter, woman. For one night only. We'll be no trouble.

HYPSIPYLE: The men of the house are away. / Lycurgus... / his wife... /

THOAS: Then we shall move on.

HYPSIPYLE: But there are guest quarters. /... hospit//... Please, go in.

*They do so.*

(*Note: the symbol / indicates use of percussive to signify gaps in the text.*)

## **Parodos**

HYPSIPYLE: (*now outside, singing to the baby*)

Your eyes are like a mirror's

gleaming brilliant, little one;  
and I your growth attend to,  
tender caring, not my son.  
My castanets enchant you  
*(the missing line is filled in by castanets)*  
not for weaving, shuttle strumming –  
songs for babies, silly mumming –  
not of Lemnos, not relieving  
all that other woman's work;  
now songs simply soothing  
Muse wants from my voice,  
songs not for weaving myth-tales –  
your songs, not my choice.

*The CHORUS OF NEMEAN WOMEN enters.*

CHORUS: Friend, what work at the doorway?

Duty this day? Sweep the threshold?  
Lay the dust, well-watered?  
Slave chores, but singing.  
Singing now of Argo, singing Jason  
fifty-oared that ship.  
Or the god-stashed fleece, the golden  
(among the leaves a serpent's eyes)?  
Or sea-girt Lemnos  
welling in you always  
drumming in your memory, those waves  
again?

But come, now, to the Nemean meadow!  
Bronze-brilliant with weapons!  
Fills the plain the Argive army!  
Against Thebes the citadel, her high boulders  
lyrically-shifted, music-translated  
Amphion's lyre-built.  
But huge hordes here

Adrastos raised, the quick of foot!  
See the strange-speaking shields!  
Golden bows, the high-legged horses!  
Come!

HYPsipyle: Crossed, the Thracian sea –  
then Peleus, a river in his blood  
he leapt the gentle wave-lick  
tied the boat ropes, moored her.  
Or at the main mast, Orpheus  
his lyre sang sad and Asian –  
slow chords called the oars in tune  
and lifted, dropped, and hastened.  
These things call my spirit  
not the heavy tread  
of southern soldiers, song  
for someone else.

CHORUS: They say, the in-the-know  
the story-tellers, that long ago  
Zeus carried off Europa  
from Tyre to Crete to rape her.  
It's bluntly put, but three sons came of it  
lived kings (not 'happy ever after' but near as mortals get).  
And princess Io, poor cow horned  
mating, got herself transformed.

If some god gets you down, think thoughts  
more middling. Then, an answer of sorts  
is hope: your father's father, after all,  
might make this place a port of call.

HYPsipyle: Procris, the huntress  
well-mourned in song  
for slain by her husband's hunting bow.

But mine, my sufferings –  
what shriek, or song sung low  
or bitter strings  
high soaring voice, and strong –  
could make known misery like mine?

CHORUS: Zeus of this grove, preserve us!  
What do they want with us?  
Coming this way! Strangers.  
They have been in the untrodden grove!

## **Episode One**

*Enter Amphiaraus.*

AMPHIARAUS: How it goes against the grain to be away from home. Travelers have needs, and all they see is barren soil, scattered shacks, no one to turn to for assistance. That's my predicament. How glad I am to see this house in the meadow of Zeus. Perhaps you are a slave on duty, perhaps not, but tell me, whose is this land and this dwelling?

HYPSIPYLE: This is the residence of Lycurgus, chosen warden of the sanctuary of Zeus.

AMPHIARAUS: My request is some pure running water in pitchers, that we may pour proper libations to the gods. The great army has churned up the runnels and ditches in the fields. The water there is too muddy.

HYPSIPYLE: Who are you? From what country have you come?

AMPHIARAUS: We are Argives, from Mycenae. As we cross the border we wish to sacrifice, for the sake of our soldiers. We are marching against the city of seven gates.

HYPSIPYLE: You will besiege Cadmus' gates?

AMPHIARAUS: Successfully or unsuccessfully.

HYPSIPYLE: May one learn from you the cause?

AMPHIARAUS: To restore Polynikes to his throne.

HYPSIPYLE: And who is it that seeks the pure running water?

AMPHIARAUS: The son of Oiclês, Amphiaraus.



HYSIPYLE: Who sailed as priest with the Argonauts?

AMPHIARAUS: Now tell me your homeland and your name.

HYSIPYLE: Lemnos. My father's name, Thoas.

AMPHIARAUS: He whom Hypsipyle saved?

*Percussion*

NARRATOR: Realizing who he is speaking to, Amphiaraus would no doubt react in some way to her present situation. This dialogue, you see, is largely a reconstruction. Perhaps Hypsipyle asked:

HYSIPYLE: As a man of peace, why are you fighting?

NARRATOR: Then, Amphiaraus must have told her a story, how, long ago, Cadmus had married Harmonia, who received as a wedding gift a divine necklace.

AMPHIARAUS: To her...

NARRATOR: Aphrodite... perhaps

AMPHIARAUS: ... gave...

NARRATOR: The necklace, which, in the end, passed down to Polynikes.

HYSIPYLE: Trouble.

AMPHIARAUS: Yes. My wife

NARRATOR: Amphiaraus' wife, Eriphyle, who happens to be the sister of Adrastus, king.

AMPHIARAUS: My wife...

NARRATOR: Received the necklace, following her...

AMPHIARAUS: ... from...

HYSIPYLE: She accepted it... *willingly?*

NARRATOR: ... seduction by... Polynikes, obviously.

AMPHIARAUS: Willingly. And I shall not return.

NARRATOR: He's not talking about divorce. Gifts can have strings attached.

Adrastos, Eriphyle's brother, would be called upon to insist: Amphiaraus, the righteous one, *must* fight... for (guess who) Polynikes.

HYSIPYLE: Then why sacrifice, if you are going to...

NARRATOR: But 'fight' wouldn't make good sense here, would it? No, ' why sacrifice if you are going to...die?' (Yes, an oracle.)

AMPHIARAUS: There is no labour in worshipping gods. It is the better way.

*Pause*

HYSIPYLE: I *shall* show the Argive the source of the river!

CHORUS: What are you saying?

Foolhardy woman, why?

*HYPSIPYLE and AMPHIARAUS go*

NARRATOR: But we don't know why the chorus seems to disapprove of Hypsipyle's decision. Is it perhaps forbidden to go into this sacred place? Or is it just a bad idea to go off into the woods with a passing soldier? But off she goes anyway, taking the baby with her. *(To the chorus)* It's your job to fill the gap. Tell us more about the cause of this war.

### **Stasimon One** *(some stylized enactment in this, a little 'play within a play')*

CHORUS: Polynikes and Tydeus

Both dressed in rags

Both asylum seekers in the land of Argos

Met in a doorway, a place to bed down

Not big enough for the two of us!

Hot word for hot word

By this god by that god

Iron then for iron

Sons of their fathers

Savage now

Their fierceness woke the king from his sleep

Adrastos, poor man

Pondering that prophecy

His daughters he would give to two ferocious beasts –

He opens the gates –

He opens his arms.

### **Episode Two**

*A scream from HYPSIPYLE, off. (Percussion punctuation indicated by /)*

CHORUS: What cry was that? /

HYPSIPYLE: *(off)* I am lost!

CHORUS: Not far away! /

Women, what? /

*Enter HYPsipyle.*

HYPsipyle: Picking flowers, his trophies, happily!

CHORUS: Where, / where

HYPsipyle: His child's mind /

CHORUS: You put /

HYPsipyle: Couldn't get enough!

CHORUS: Him down? /

*HYPsipyle cries out.*

CHORUS: For a woman, this /

HYPsipyle: The spring, / among shadows

CHORUS: Where the serpent /

HYPsipyle: Shaking its crest. Terrible eyes, staring ///

CHORUS: Shepherds flee from his silence... //

You put him down!

HYPsipyle: I am not to blame! /

CHORUS: His guardian /

HYPsipyle: His death will be punished. I'm shaking.

CHORUS: No stranger to misfortune, you.

HYPsipyle: I must run away. /

CHORUS: Where? What city will take you?

HYPsipyle: My legs, my urgency, they'll decide.

CHORUS: The land is guarded.

HYPsipyle: You're right. That's not possible. I'm leaving anyway! /

CHORUS: Wait. We are friends, we'll advise you.

HYPsipyle: How to get away?

CHORUS: You want us to help a runaway slave? //

EURYDICE: (*inside the palace*) The slave woman, my child's nurse, she is not in the palace. Is he asleep outside, by the doorway perhaps, where she waits for him to wake? Is she holding him tight to stop his tears? Draw the bolts.

*EURYDICE enters.*

HYPsipyle: The child... gone... I am ruined...

NARRATOR: The text is very fragmentary at this point. (*To Eurydice*) Your child has been killed by the snake that guards the source.

*Silent scream from EURYDICE.*

NARRATOR: (*To Eurydice*) Naturally, you accuse her. (*He binds Hypsipyle's hands.*) She tries to defend herself, telling the story. Amphiaraus, she says...

HYPSIPYLE: A libation... virtue... the stranger...

NARRATOR: ...moved her, being virtuous. She believes she made the right decision.

HYPSIPYLE: If you are not persuaded... Apollo...

NARRATOR: She pleads that no judgment be made rashly, in anger. Probably.

HYPSIPYLE: ... women...

NARRATOR: ...are emotional, no doubt. Meaning you. But...

HYPSIPYLE: ...discriminate... in time... if you make an error...

NARRATOR: As one of the unplaced fragments says, "Everyone is wiser when free from anger". Hypsipyle must have spoken well. At least the chorus thinks so.

CHORUS: You have spoken nobly.

I too want to be considered among those with good sense.

NARRATOR: It was not their child.

EURYDICE: Why do you seize upon these specious words? Going on and on, when you have killed Opheltes, the joy of my eyes. You ask me to forget my son! My baby, my son! When you have murdered him!

HYPSIPYLE: Majesty, are you determined I must die, before you know all, in such anger? (*Pause*) You don't respond, give no answer. I don't care about dying, but to be thought the murderer of a little child, my own in everything except I did not give him birth, my only joy! No! Oh, where now is the Argo, bows stirring the white water? Where now are my sons? To die in such shame! Amphiaraus, defend me from this false and shameful accusation! You are the cause! You know the truth, my story! She would accept your words! (*Pause*) I see no friend nearby to help me. The service I did him was useless. Take me.

*Enter AMPHIARAUS*

AMPHIARAUS: Hold, you who send her to her death, mistress of the house. By your bearing I see that you are noble.

HYPSIPYLE: Amphiaraus, by these knees, by your beard, as you are Apollo's prophet, protect me. I am punished for helping you. I am condemned. You see these bonds. Desert me, you will cast shame on Argos and on Greece. You who can read the future of the southern army, tell her about the baby. She claims I planned her baby's death, plotting against her family.

AMPHIARAUS: I came because I knew what would become of you once the child's life had been taken from him. I have come to defend you, not with force of arm but purity of heart, for there is shame in not giving, having first received. (*To Eurydice*) Unveil yourself, lady. All Greece knows my gaze is temperate, raised, as I have been, for self-control and to look into, not upon. Listen now. Give up your haste. In all else, error is legitimate, but in the matter of a man's or a woman's life, it is not good.

EURYDICE: Sir, stranger from Argos, your reputation for discretion is well-known to me, or you would not have looked... at my face. Since you wish it, I am ready both to listen and to explain.

AMPHIARUS: Lady, you are reacting harshly to this unlucky woman's transgression. I plead in mitigation, not for her sake, but for the sake of justice. If I mislead you, I should be shamed before Apollo, whose art of prophecy I practice. It was I who persuaded this woman to show me the pure, running water, that I might use it for sacrifice upon the army's departure from Argive earth. She laid the child on the ground, in a bed of wild celery, then went with us to reveal the bright source among thick bushes. Rapidly a serpent slid towards the child and shot out its tongue, and bit him, and tightened its coils around him, so suffocating him. At his cry, we ran back. I shot the snake. Too late.

Now this, truly I tell you, is a beginning, it is not an end. I therefore give your child a new name, Archemoros, 'the beginning of doom'. You will not be alone in your suffering. It is an omen for the Argives. For many has there been a departure, for few will there be a homecoming, and all the sons of mothers. Of the seven champions, King Adrastos alone will know Argos once more. This is the meaning of what has happened.

My advice for the future, please accept it. To be born is to be mortal, thence to suffer. We bury children, beget others, and die ourselves in turn. And mortals grieve at the return of earth to earth. Yet it must be. Life is a harvest, an abundant crop, though one of us lives and another does not. Why should we lament this? Why grieve at what is in the nature of human life?

It would be fitting, Lady, that you give your child to us, that Argos may bury him as he deserves. His name will live on, for all time, and men will remember your suffering, for great fame will be his, founder of the Nemean Games, and garlands of wild celery, honouring Archemoros, will crown the victors. This will

be his memorial in the grove of Nemea. This woman is blameless. Release her. What has happened is for the good and will bring honour to both you and your son.

*Pause*

EURYDICE: O my son, to you, I....

NARRATOR: Yet more lost words. But we know what Eurydice said immediately after, for this was preserved in a later collection of moral maxims.

EURYDICE: We should look into the natures of the good and bad, and at what they do, and how they live. We should put our trust in those who are temperate and wise, avoiding those who lack morality.

NARRATOR: What do you mean?

EURYDICE: I suppose I mean that I ought to accept what Amphiaraus says. He is one of those who are temperate and wise, after all.

NARRATOR: Then you allow him to bury your son?

EURYDICE: Yes.

*Exit AMPHIARAUS.*

NARRATOR: And her? Should I untie her?

EURYDICE: It's very difficult.... Yes.

*The NARRATOR unties HYPsipyle.*

NARRATOR: If we were to take a bow now, how would you feel? Let down?

Cheated? But that's all we've got. How we get from here to the recognition scene – the one we started with – is completely unknown. A few scraps of lines exist, mainly from a choral ode to Dionysos. Listen.

*(He begins to chant. The chorus 'backs' him, whispers, rounds out, rhythmically echoes, amplifies in minimalistic quasi-dance. This generates a sense of 'real' – but understated – ritual. The fragments acquire the feel of poetry – of a strangely intentional implicitness.)*

Who on out the chambers  
up the Ether what the Sign –  
the giving grape the spreading  
drip of nectar drip of nectar  
maybe maybe (joy!)  
–  
Revered thing of gods

mistress our earth  
invisible the light  
the firstborn in mist Desire  
willed it and the Night

—

On the breeze smoke  
even in rooms the roarer god goes  
three-leaved his stick  
and in my house  
and on my shoulder  
and in *my* hand.

*(Solo again, spoken.)* Dionysos. Remember him? Hypsipyle's grandfather.  
Maybe he's pulling strings in the background. Looking on. Looking out... *at you?* A god-gaze? From 'backstage'? Metaphorically, of course. We know he appears in the end, to speak the last speech of the play. But not before. As for the remaining plot, well, sorry, it's a mystery. *(He starts to go)*

*THOAS and EUNEOS enter from the palace.*

THOAS: Wait. We haven't yet spoken to the queen.

NARRATOR: So?

EUNEOS: When we do, we'll see she's in mourning.

THOAS: We'll ask why.

EUNEOS: She'll tell us the whole story.

NARRATOR: She'll also tell us of the founding of the Nemean Games in her son's honour.

THOAS: We'll ask if we can compete on her behalf.

EUNEOS: In repayment for her hospitality to us.

NARRATOR: You might get the story from Hypsipyle. Wouldn't that be more ironic?

THOAS: But we'll need Eurydice's permission to compete.

EUNEOS: Why else should the Argives let us?

*Pause*

NARRATOR: Obviously you win something.

THOAS: Then our names and background are announced.

EUNEOS: Amphiaraus realizes who we are. Who our mother is!

NARRATOR: Yes. That accounts for something he says.

*Jump to Anagnorisis*

AMPHIARAUS: (*entering*) Lady, your service to me has been repaid. I requested your help. Freely you gave it. Now I have reunited you with your twin sons.

Farewell. We, as we set out to do, must continue our march against Thebes.

NARRATOR: It's shaping up.

HYSIPYLE: But how am I freed?

EURYDICE: These young men do me a great honour by competing on my behalf.

When I realize they're your sons, I repay them by freeing you.

HYSIPYLE: That's very magnanimous of you.

EURYDICE: Isn't it? It's a good thing my husband is away.

NARRATOR: O yes, Lycurgus. We've forgotten him.

HYSIPYLE: If he returns, what happens to me?

CHORUS: Let's vote on it. I say he doesn't show. (*To Hypsipyle*) We're with you.

HYSIPYLE: But we're reconstructing.

CHORUS: Are we? Aren't we *rewriting*?

DRUMMER: (*intervening*) Wait! I'm sorry, but I can't believe this play would end so... lamely.

NARRATOR: 'This play'?

DRUMMER: The one by Euripides.

NARRATOR: Explain.

DRUMMER: Lycurgus, obviously, is equally wronged by the baby's death.

CHORUS: He's on a business trip.... Of course, I *do* feel sorry for him.... So do I.

DRUMMER: But Euripides loved to raise the stakes near the end. Especially in the later plays. New twists in the plot and screw 'unity of action'. No, there's no way the king would fail to turn up.

CHORUS: It's not a question of what Euripides did. Did. Did. Past tense.

DRUMMER: Oh?

CHORUS: No. It's a question of what makes a good play. Makes.

DRUMMER/LYCURGUS: I can agree to that. Right then, Hypsipyle has to die. She has to be condemned again.

CHORUS: Why?

HYSIPYLE: I think I *was* negligent.

DRUMMER/LYCURGUS: For a 'good play'.



HYPSIPYLE: But criminally?

AMPHIARAUS: But...

LYCURGUS: (*To AMPHIARAUS*) Silence! You had your say. You can't tell me that a happy ending makes a good tragedy. (*He begins binding Hypsipyle again*)

CHORUS: You said a good *play*.

HYPSIPYLE: Negligent, OK, in a sense, but... the question is, did I know?

CHORUS: Know what?

HYPSIPYLE: About the snake. When I put the baby down.

CHORUS: We knew.

HYPSIPYLE: Then why didn't you tell me???

CHORUS: Didn't we?

LYCURGUS: Where's a tree? (*He looks around*) Anyone got a sword?

EURYDICE: But what about...?

LYCURGUS: Don't even think of suggesting it! I have made my decree. *This* is a fitting end. And she deserves it – well, almost. But that's tragedy. *No deus ex machina*. It *is* the twenty-first century for Christ's sake! There's absolutely no reason for Dionysos to turn up out of the blue.

THOAS: Does he need one?

NARRATOR: (*with absolute authority*) **NO!** (*Brief pause. To audience, wryly*) The last speech of the play – remember?

*The others look at him... and realize. 'LYCURGUS' returns (lamely, defeated) to his drums.*

*Appropriate percussion.*

**END**